



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

U.S. Forest Service: Cooperative Conservation Activities

Executive Order 13352 directs agencies named therein to carry out the programs, projects, and activities of the agency that implement laws relating to the environment and natural resources in a manner that:

- facilitates cooperative conservation;
- takes appropriate account of and respects the interests of persons with ownership or other legally recognized interests in land and other natural resources;
- properly accommodates local participation in Federal decisionmaking; and
- provides that the programs, projects, and activities are consistent with protecting public health and safety.

These concepts are inherent in the following Forest Service guiding principles (Forest Service Manual 1021):

- We are good neighbors who respect private property rights.
- We strive for quality and excellence in everything we do and are sensitive to the effects of our decisions on people and resources.
- We strive to meet the needs of our customers in fair, friendly, and open ways.
- We form partnerships to achieve shared goals.
- We promote grass-roots participation in our decisions and activities.

What follows are selected activities and projects being conducted by the Forest Service to promote cooperative conservation.

Learning Lab 2006

The Forest Service National Partnership Office initiated learning labs as a way to build organizational capacity for cooperative conservation by exposing individuals to the best practices of working collaboratively. The National Riparian Service Team (NRST) was selected as the pilot “Learning Lab” because of their success in applying national level policies regarding community involvement and collaboration through an operating framework that emphasizes joint fact finding, communication, and learning while doing. Nine participants, representing a spectrum of partners and government practitioners were selected to travel and work with the NRST over the 2006 field season. Coaching and mentoring opportunities were centered around “service trips,” which are tailored capacity building activities, blending technical and social dimensions, as needed over time to facilitate changed behaviors on the ground.

Key Partners

Key partners for each of the 2006 “service trips” include:

1. Custer National Forest: Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, South Dakota Fish and Game, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Landowners, Permittees, Natural Resources Conservation Service, South Dakota and Montana extension, and County Weed Supervisors;

2. Shasta Valley, California: Shasta Valley Resource Conservation District, Landowners, and California Fish and Game;
3. Fremont-Winema National Forest: Lake County Watershed Council, Lakeview Soil and Water Conservation District, Forest Service, Landowners, Permittees, Lake County Resources Initiative, Ducks Unlimited, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, and Oregon State University extension.

Results and Accomplishments

Results and accomplishments of this program are best described in the words of the participants:

Caitlin Bean, Biologist, California Fish and Game – “I do not have any formal training in social science, yet in order to be successful in fulfilling conservation mandates a good understanding of social processes is critical. Experiential learning about the NRST process has really opened my eyes regarding the potential success garnered through the use of key consensus and team building experiences...Experiencing these social processes with the NRST has provided me with new ideas and additional skills for designing collaborative approaches to problem solving in Siskiyou County.” *Caitlin is spearheading the Shasta and Scott Valley efforts.*

Jim David, Soil Scientist, Ochoco National Forest – “I learned how to professionally listen, ask questions and formulate answers in a politically sensitive manner. One of the most important concepts stressed was working with a group to set realistic and attainable goals for stream function.” *Jim is now helping the group develop options for fixing headcuts using both rock and geotextiles.*

Finally, at the request of Learning Lab participants, a three-day, hands-on workshops were held in November 2006. Participants learned basic process tools for managing natural resource conflicts related to change, power, scarcity, and diversity. Participants learned tools and techniques for conducting situation assessments, convening groups of people around difficult situations, and creating an atmosphere of listening with respect that is critical to resolving tough issues.

Forest Planning Rule

In January 2005, the Department of Agriculture revised its regulations for Forest Service land management planning. Under the revised rule, the Responsible Official must use a collaborative and participatory approach to land management planning. Public participation and collaboration are welcomed and encouraged to help balance conflicting needs, to evaluate management under the plans, and to consider the need to adjust plans.

The rule also encourages the use of an iterative process for developing and narrowing plan options in collaboration with the public. This will increase the involvement and role of people who work with the Forest Service in planning. While many units of the National Forest System already go to great lengths to work with the public in forest planning, such efforts are expected to increase under the 2005 rule.

Field officials can often reach agreement with many members of the public on the desired social, economic, and ecological conditions for the planning area. Consensus on desired conditions can lead to agreement on plan objectives and ultimately to agreement on management of many areas. Finding these areas of agreement early in the process will help build relationships and narrow the areas where differences remain.

Key Partners

Responsible Officials encourage collaboration and participation by interested individuals and organizations, including private landowners whose lands are within, adjacent to, or otherwise affected by future management actions within the plan area. Responsible Officials also must meet with and provide early opportunities for other government agencies to be involved, collaborate, and participate in planning for National Forest System lands. Responsible Officials must also consult with, invite, and provide opportunities for federally recognized Indian Tribes to collaborate and participate in planning.

Results and Accomplishments

Because of the advantages outlined above, 22 of the 26 National Forests originally revising their land management plans under the 1982 rule have chosen to complete their revisions under the 2005 rule.

Planning-Oriented Collaboration Curriculum

The Forest Service Ecosystem Management Coordination staff (EMC) is in the beginning phase of developing a planning-oriented collaboration curriculum with the goal of: providing diagnostic tools for selecting and implementing the most productive collaborative strategies for each forest's unique situation. This curriculum will help forest leadership and planning teams answer the question: What might collaboration look like on my particular forest? The target audience is forest planning teams, forest leadership teams, and community counterparts.

Key Partners

The curriculum is being developed by Drs. Sam Burns of Fort Lewis College and Tony Cheng of Colorado State University in conjunction with Forest Service Ecosystem Management Coordination planning staff. This effort comes directly from a 2003, cooperative research project initiated between Forest Service State and Private Forestry, Fort Lewis College, and Colorado State University to examine collaboration in forest plan revisions across six national forests in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. The purpose of the research was to examine what are some collaboration "best practices" being developed on-the-ground by Forest Service leadership and staff.

Results and Accomplishments

The researchers found numerous collaboration innovations developed by forest planning teams throughout the plan revision process from assessments to suitability analysis. Based on the research, Burns and Cheng have received continuing Forest Service support to develop and pilot a collaboration curriculum specifically targeted at forest planning. The curriculum draws directly on Forest Service staff innovations and provides a

foundation collaboration curriculum to assist Forest Service units in efficiently and effectively designing and managing their collaboration efforts.

A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan

In August 2001, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior joined the Western Governors' Association, the National Association of State Foresters, the National Association of Counties, and the Intertribal Timber Council to endorse and later publish *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: A 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy*. For greater detail see The Implementation Plan establishes a collaborative, performance-based framework for achieving the goals and actions outlined in the Comprehensive Strategy.

The Implementation Plan has a three-tiered organizational structure that facilitates collaboration among governments and stakeholders at the local, state/regional, and national levels. These levels are based on the participants' scope of decision-making, management responsibility, and/or interest rather than traditional governmental hierarchies and allow Federal, State, Tribal and local governments to be represented at each level. While the Implementation Plan pre-dates the White House Conference of Cooperative Conservation, it illustrates and provides context for significant cooperative conservation efforts.

In June 2003, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior collaborated on procedures for expediting environmental analysis and documentation for certain hazardous fuels reduction activities. In keeping with the Implementation Plan's collaboration goal, these new procedures only apply to activities identified through a collaborative framework as described in the Implementation Plan.

Key Partners

The Implementation Plan is the product of collaboration among the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, and the Western Governors. The Western Governors also consulted with and utilized input from a broader group of interested stakeholders and experts. See Appendix C of the Implementation Plan for a complete list of collaborators.

Results and Accomplishments

Ninety-six of the 168 actions items set forth in the Implementation Plan have been completed while others comprised continuous tasks. With much of this work accomplished, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council launched an effort to update the Implementation Plan. In 2005, task groups composed of stakeholders and agency representatives reviewed past and current tasks, actions, and performance measures and suggested updates. In 2006, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council considered these recommended changes and worked with the task groups to consider responsibility for data gathering and to provide direction for completion of the review and update.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2004 (HFRA) provides communities with a tremendous opportunity to influence where and how federal agencies implement fuel reduction projects on federal lands. The Act encourages the development of community wildfire protection plans as the most effective way to take advantage of this opportunity. The Act also directs that communities with community wildfire protection plans in place be given priority for funding of hazardous fuels reduction projects carried out under the auspices of the Act. Community wildfire protection plans represent an opportunity to address wildland urban interface challenges through locally supported solutions.

Key Partners

Community wildfire protection plans are developed in the context of the collaborative agreements and guidance established by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council and agreed to by the local government, local fire department, and State agencies responsible for forest management in consultation with interested parties and the Federal land management agencies that manage land near an at-risk community. Excellent guidance has been provided for development of these plans in the form of a handbook sponsored by the Communities Committee, National Association of Counties, National Association of State Foresters, Society of American Foresters, and Western Governors Association.

Results and Accomplishments

Communities across the country have seized the opportunity to develop collaboratively their own community wildfire protection plans. Because of these plans, communities have defined their own wildland urban interface boundaries. (At least 50% of funds appropriated under HFRA must be used within wildland urban interface.) Therefore, these communities influence how and where Federal agencies implement fuels projects. Communities with completed plans also receive priority for grants and funding for hazardous fuels reduction.

Preparation of these plans has built trust among participants and strengthened relationships between agencies and communities.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

The USDA Forest Service is committed to conserving and managing inventoried roadless areas and considers these areas an important component of the National Forest System. In May 2005, the Department of Agriculture adopted a new rule that established a State petitioning process that allowed State-specific consideration of the needs of these areas to address the challenges of inventoried roadless area management on National Forest System lands.

Key Partners

States affected by the roadless rule have been keenly interested in inventoried roadless area management, especially the Western States where most of the agency's inventoried roadless areas are located. Collaborating and cooperating with States on the long-term strategy for the conservation and management of inventoried roadless areas on NFS lands allows for the recognition of local situations and resolutions of unique resource

management challenges within a specific State. Collaboration with others who have strong interest in the conservation and management of inventoried roadless areas also helps ensure balanced management decisions that maintain the most important characteristics and values of those areas.

The Secretary of Agriculture established a national advisory committee to provide advice and recommendations on the implementation of this State-specific petition for rulemaking process. The advisory committee consists of members who represent diverse national organizations interested in the conservation and management of National Forest System inventoried roadless areas. These organizations include Utah Department of Natural Resources, Blue Ribbon Coalition, Public Lands Council, Izaak Walton League, Montana Wilderness Association, National Ski Areas Association, Intermountain Forest Association, Arch Coal, Inc., Center for Biological Diversity, United Brotherhood of Carpenters, Wildlaw, and Trout Unlimited.

Results and Accomplishments

Six States (North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, New Mexico, California, and Idaho) petitioned the Secretary for rulemaking for roadless area management. In October, the United States District Court for the Northern District of California set aside the State Petitions Rule. Subsequent to this ruling, the Secretary encouraged States to petition or re-petition under provisions of the Administrative Procedures Act for State-specific consideration of roadless area management. To date, only Idaho and Colorado have petitioned under the Administrative Procedures Act provisions. States indicating plans to petition the Secretary include Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Maine.

Performance in Teamwork and Partnerships

The Forest Service is implementing a new five-level performance appraisal system to help the Forest Service carry out its mission more efficiently and effectively by aligning employee performance to work plans that support the agency's strategic goals. Even as the agency works collaboratively with the Cooperative Conservation Competencies working group, it is already acknowledging the importance of partnership and collaboration by reflecting these behaviors in its new performance appraisal system. Performance in all non-SES Forest Service positions will be appraised with a standard set of performance elements. One of these standard elements is "Teamwork and Partnerships." This performance element includes demonstrating collaboration and flexibility and building effective internal and external partnerships.

Key Partners

The performance elements were developed by an agency Human Capital Team consisting of Washington Office staff, Regional line and staff, and Forest Products Lab staff, and a union representative.

Results and Accomplishments

The new performance appraisal system is scheduled for implementation in 2007.

Handover Memo

The Collaboration Action Team, a national-level group of governmental and non-governmental organizations, recommended to the Forest Service's National Leadership Team that a "handover memo" be created. Recognizing the need for improved transitions between outgoing leaders and incoming leaders who will assume the responsibility for working directly with the public and partners, the agency adopted the use of this memo. The handover memo is designed to contain information about relationships with partners, collaborative efforts underway, any commitments that have been made, and any work agreements or procedures that partners are using with the agency/unit.

Key Partners

The Collaboration Action Team consists of members representing the National Forest Foundation, Ford Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Sonoran Institute, Conservation Study Institute, Association of Partners for Public Lands, and the Forest Service.

Results and Accomplishments

The memo is to be completed by the outgoing leader prior to departure and addressed to the incoming leader.

Forest Service Partnership Enhancement Act [H.R. 3818 and S. 2676]

The Partnership Enhancement Act would improve the Forest Service's ability to work with a wide variety of cooperators by expanding, clarifying, and simplifying legal authority to enter into mutual benefit agreements. Two bills have been introduced into Congress with bipartisan support, H.R. 3818 and S. 2676. They are based on a proposal developed by the Forest Service and sent to Congress by the Administration. The Forest Service has accumulated authorities for working cooperatively over a 100-year period, and at times, the complex patchwork of existing authorities has resulted in inconsistent interpretation and time-consuming processes. The bills give Congress an opportunity to provide clarification and update authorities to reflect new kinds of cooperative conservation relationships in the 21st century.

The bills would:

- Demonstrate Forest Service commitment to cooperative conservation,
- Make the Forest Service easier to work with,
- Provide legal clarity and less red tape from consolidated authority,
- Make permanent crucial and fundamental "mutual benefit" type agreements,
- Enhance watershed resources through cooperative projects,
- Allow joint facilities and publications for interpretation and education,
- Allow visitors to purchase health and safety items in remote locations,
- Allow funds to be advanced to partners, and
- Provide for long term partnerships through permanent authority.

Key Partners

H.R. 3818 was introduced by Representatives Walden (R-OR) and Udall (D-NM). Senators Crapo (R-ID) and Lincoln (D-AR) introduced S. 2676. It is similar to H.R. 3818, with a new section relating to the National Forest Foundation.

Results and Accomplishments

A hearing was held before the House Resources Forests and Forest Health Subcommittee on September 27, 2005. The Administration testified in strong support of the bill, and it was subsequently voted favorably out of committee.

U.S. Forest Service: Cooperative Conservation Projects

The Forest Service is engaged in hundreds, if not thousands of projects that espouse the concepts of cooperative conservation. From land management planning to hazardous fuels reduction projects planned under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative or the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, collaboration is not only key, it is a required element. Rather than enumerate this plethora of projects, two innovative examples are provided to illustrate the creativity of forest personnel in cooperative conservation.

Trees for Mt. Lemmon

In June of 2003, wildfire devastated the once thriving community of Summerhaven, Arizona. Yet, before long, residents were planting trees to heal the blackened scars. To help this replanting effort, the "Trees for Mt. Lemmon" collaborative was formed to collect native ponderosa pine seeds and grow trees for reforestation on private land under a cooperative agreement with the Forest Service. Through their consistent efforts, homeowners grew to see the importance of preserving the genetic integrity of the Santa Catalina Mountains, or "Sky Island," as residents refer to it. And they didn't stop there. "Trees for Mt. Lemmon" was instrumental in bringing together an independent group of stakeholders to form the "Santa Catalina Mountains Partnership." This partnership meets regularly to develop innovative projects that restore healthy forests and build sustainable communities.

Innovation/Highlight

The community of Summerhaven is in the process of rebuilding. On the main street through the village, all but three of the local business and the Post Office were lost in the fire, along with many residences. To soften the new appearance, "Trees for Mt. Lemmon" came forward. In 2004, they were awarded a grant from the Joseph and Mary Cacioppo Foundation for \$1,600 to install a demonstration garden in front of the Mt. Lemmon General Store, the first business to be rebuilt. The grand opening attracted mountain residents and business owners as well as many Tucsonans. And a grand event it was. The first business had risen from the ashes and debris. Suddenly, everything was possible. The community could recover. The garden was well-received by community members and visitors, and was symbolic of what was to come, what could be. To determine which plant species were appropriate for the garden, Trees for Mt. Lemmon collaborated with the University of Arizona Arboretum and the Forest Service. In addition to creating a new sense of hope, the garden provides an example of what

homeowners can plant, and provides a splash of color to the otherwise darkened landscape.

Resource Challenge

Invasive species often move into disturbed areas following wildfire. They know no jurisdictional boundaries. Such was the case following the Aspen Fire. Trees for Mt. Lemmon secured two grants from the University of Arizona to address this problem. The funding came from the Forest Service as “Forest Health Invasive Species Issues” money, administered by the University. In 2004 the group utilized \$10,000 for the education of homeowners on invasive species and the threats they posed, and to distribute packets of native grass and wildflower seeds for use on their properties. They conducted classes on how to plant the seeds, and at the end of the year, they conducted a survey to determine which species germinated successfully. In 2005, they received \$10,000 to inventory invasive species (the inventory is currently underway, in collaboration with the Forest Service), to educate community members upon completion of the inventory, and to embark on eradication projects.

Key Partners

U.S. Marine Corps, National Forest Foundation, Forest Service, Coronado Resource Conservation and Development Conservation District, Arizona Community Tree Council, Community leaders and members from Tucson and Summerhaven, University of Arizona

Results and Accomplishments

Following the fires, Summerhaven residents have worked together with the Forest Service to achieve status as a Firewise Community. “Trees for Mt. Lemmon” was instrumental in this process and they continue to promote Firewise through their educational programs. Each program presented includes a 30-minute Firewise presentation. The group also participates in each annual Firewise exposition on Mt. Lemmon. Additionally, they include Firewise materials in their educational packets, and they work with the Firewise Community to put Firewise materials into newcomer packets distributed by the Mt. Lemmon realtors.

Each year since the Aspen Fire, Trees for Mt. Lemmon has sponsored the Aspen Ball, a dinner and dance with a silent auction to bring the community together and to raise money for the Mt. Lemmon Fire District, the Mt. Lemmon Water District, and Trees for Mt. Lemmon. In 2004, the event raised \$21,000 and in 2005, \$24,000. The Forest Service has been invited to greet guests and to present fire prevention programs and educational materials.

These results are but a part of Trees for Mt. Lemmon’s accomplishments. They came together to plant native trees on Mt. Lemmon and keep the sky island genetics pure, on private and public land. What they have done goes far beyond that. They have fostered genetic purity of the ponderosa pine forest, community rebuilding, and collaborative stewardship. They have initiated the process of healing the forest and healing the community.

Trees for Mt. Lemmon was the recipient of the 2006 Forest Service Chief's Partnership Award.

San Bernardino National Forest Association

The San Bernardino National Forest Association (SBNFA) was created to support the San Bernardino National Forest by bringing in new resources to help the Forest meet its mission. Those resources include financial support, in-kind donations of equipment, supplies and materials, and most importantly, volunteers. Currently there are over 900 volunteers participating in the Association's programs. These volunteers give their life time skills, talents and expertise to care for the Forest and to ensure that Forest visitors are aware of the beauty, history and fragility of the Forest. Whether they are Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) volunteers doing trail maintenance, staffing a Fire Lookout, greeting visitors at Children's Forest or the Big Bear Discovery Center, they are all working hand-in-hand with Forest Service personnel to ensure the survivability of the Forest.

Innovation/Highlight

Since 1992 the SBNFA has developed new resources and partnerships that create new opportunities, particularly through the efforts of volunteers, for conservation, education, and recreation that have added value to the forest's role as public land. The SBNFA is composed of the following six divisions:

1. The Forest Care program is a \$4 million outreach effort to increase fire-resistance around homes and businesses while thinning the forest to healthy densities. Through Forest Care, property owners are reimbursed for up to 75% of the cost.
2. The Big Bear Discovery Center connects the forest and people through its visitor center facilities and activities. The Center provides permits, passes, maps, interpretive tours and programs, as well as an "Adventure Outpost" and View Café.
3. Children's Forest is forest discovery for and by kids. Children's Forest Youth Hosts and Youth Naturalists are almost as astonishing as the forest mysteries they reveal.
4. Fire Lookouts carry on a 75-year tradition of service to the forest by restoring and staffing seven lookouts during the summer with volunteer interpreters and educators.
5. Fire Education Outreach promotes understanding of fire and its role in the forest ecology—from forest renewal to a virtual experience of the ferocity of a real forest fire. The program offers traveling exhibits for display at public events including the Wildfire Education trailer and an original 1924 Model T Forest Patrol vehicle. These volunteers also assist during major wildfire incidents in and around the Forest by answering fire information phone lines and interpreting at the air tanker base, among other emergency related tasks.
6. Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) Programs promote safety, stewardship, and responsible off-highway travel on public lands.

Resource Challenge

The San Bernardino National Forest and surrounding communities face a continuing threat from wildfire. Despite successful fuels reduction projects and increased rainfall in

2005, individual property owners must continue to do their part to create safer communities for all residents.

Key Partners

The SBNFA has numerous partnerships, some of these include: Mt. Baldy/Angelos Environmental Education Partnership; Casa de San Bernardino; Desert Horizons Media; Lake Arrowhead Chamber of Commerce; Crafton Hills College; Education Outreach Program; 14 OHV Partnering Dealers; City of Big Bear; California Department of Forest and Fire; and the San Bernardino National Forest.

Results and Accomplishments

The San Bernardino National Forest Association (SBNFA) had a very successful year due to the expansion of programs, volunteers and staff. Staff and programs were strongly supported by 995 volunteers that provided 56,590 hours of support.

Volunteers

SBNFA Volunteers	995 (27 FTE Equivalent)
SBNFA Volunteer Hours	56, 590 (through August 2006)
Volunteer Match	\$1,416,447 (\$25.03/hour)

Personnel

SBNFA Staff	25 Fulltime
SBNFA Divisions	6

Visitor Services

Contacts	158,083
Calls	70,225

Match

Volunteer Match	\$1,416,447 (\$25.03/hour)
Staff salary	\$776,638 (-175K for Forest Service contribution)
Supplies and materials	\$127,861
Contributed professional services	\$158,506
Capital Campaign services	\$40,000
Total	\$2,415,485

For more information, visit the SBNFA website at www.sbnfa.org.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Cooperative Conservation Activities

NRCS Strategic plan is in concert with the goals of Executive Order 13352.

Overarching Strategies

To achieve our objectives efficiently and effectively, we will:

- Seek and promote cooperative conservation efforts to achieve conservation goals;

- Provide information and assistance to encourage and enable locally led, watershed-scale conservation; and
- Facilitate the growth of market-based opportunities that encourage business and industry to invest in conservation on private lands.

These concepts are inherent in the NRCS Strategic Plan 2005-2010 overview.

Guiding Principles:

- Service – provide the highest quality service to all clientele equally.
- Partnership – bring traditional and nontraditional partners together to achieve common objectives, and
- Technical Excellence – deliver science-based information and technology to enable effective conservation stewardship.

Implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill

The 2002 Farm Bill is the single most emphatic statement about the importance of conservation on working agricultural lands in America. The 2002 farm bill committed unprecedented resources—more than \$17.1 billion in funding over 10 years—for conservation.

Key Partners

NRCS has reached out aggressively to establish formal relationships among key conservation organizations, universities, State and local governments and other Federal agencies. Some of these partners include the American Society of Agronomy, the Certified Professionals in Erosion and Sediment Control, Inc., the Society for Range Management, the American Forage and Grassland Council, the Wildlife Society, the American Fisheries Society, the Association of Consulting Foresters, the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists, Iowa State University, University of Tennessee, the Irrigation Association, Validus, the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants, and the Society of American Foresters.

Results and Accomplishments

Since 2002, NRCS has provided assistance to one million farmers and ranchers. Together, we have applied conservation on more than 130 million acres of land. We've helped farmers apply more than 14,000 Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans. We have invested \$6.6 billion of the taxpayers' funds directly with landowners to produce environmental improvements that will benefit us all.

Since enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill, our conservation partner organizations including the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, State and local governments and other conservation organizations have contributed an additional \$2.8 billion to conservation programs, making the total investment under the 2002 Farm Bill through last year more than \$9.4 billion. Working cooperatively with our partners we have achieved remarkable results. NRCS continues to build upon cooperative conservation with their strategic plan, which emphasizes cooperative conservation as one of three overarching strategies.

Preparation for the 2007 Farm Bill

During the summer and fall of 2005 Secretary Johanns and other top USDA officials held a series of 53 listening sessions across the country to hear directly from landowners about what they'd like to see in the next farm bill. Upon conclusion of the listening sessions USDA staff analyzed the information shared in these forums as well additional public comments. Drawing upon these recommendations, USDA issued a series of theme papers that discuss how USDA programs operate and options for potential changes.

Key Partners

The thousands of farmers, ranchers, and other stakeholders who responded with honest, thoughtful, and candid comments about future farm policy during the 2007 Farm Bill Forums.

Results and Accomplishments

In June of 2006, USDA released the 2007 Farm Bill Conservation and Environment Theme Paper. It includes a careful analysis of how conservation funds are distributed geographically, information on program costs and distribution as well as economic and market effects and overall breakdown of funding. For example, 15 percent of all farms received conservation payments in 2004, averaging \$5,330 per farm. The conservation theme paper also lists some of the specific benefits achieved through our current conservation programs, for example the results from the Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) study on soil erosion where a remarkable 43 percent decline in soil erosion took place from 1982 to 2003. An additional study focused on wetlands and concluded that a net gain of 260,000 acres of wetlands took place from 1997 to 2003. The conservation paper also outlines alternatives for changes in the conservation programs in the next farm bill. These, of course, are just possible alternatives based upon recurring themes from the participants' comments, not USDA or Administration policy or proposals. For example one option is to improve existing conservation programs by making greater use of watershed or landscape approaches and "pay for performance" strategies, increasing the use of market mechanisms such as reverse auctions and bidding or the use of private sector markets for environmental services.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Strategic Plan

One of the three overarching strategies in the Natural Resources Conservation Service is cooperative conservation.

Key Partners

NRCS values partnerships with Federal, State, local, and Tribal resource agencies and organizations that share common objectives, although our missions may differ.

Results and Accomplishments

NRCS fosters the discussions needed to bring people together and works toward facilitating locally led conservation efforts that meet local goals and serve the broader national interest. NRCS continues to work towards increasing our investment in developing the resource information and analytical and planning tools that cooperating

agencies and organizations, State and local governments, and Tribes can use to reach consensus on natural resource goals and take action to achieve their goals. NRCS is always looking to broaden the conservation partnership and build new alliances.

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)

The Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) is a voluntary program established to foster conservation partnerships that focus technical and financial resources on conservation priorities in watersheds and airsheds of special significance. Under CCPI, funds are awarded to State and local governments and agencies; Indian tribes; and non-governmental organizations that have a history of working with agricultural producers. The CCPI is a component of the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program, established under authorities provided by the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935, 16 U.S.C. 590a *et seq.* NRCS administers CCPI.

Key Partners

The New England Small Farm Institute, Missouri Department of Conservation, Big Hole River Foundation, San Francisco Soil and Water Conservation District, Great Salt Lake Resource Conservation and Development Council, Pierce Conservation District, Pit Resource Conservation District, Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission, Unity Barn Raisers, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, North Central Mississippi Resource Conservation and Development Council, Center for Agricultural Partnerships and the Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences.

Results and Accomplishments

In fiscal years 2004 and 2005, NRCS awarded \$1 million dollars annually to projects through the Conservation Partnership Initiative (CPI). The program has been renamed the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and expanded in funding and scope for fiscal year 2006. The 2006 CCPI offers two components, the Conservation Priorities component and the Rapid Watershed Assessment (RWA). Eligible applicants must complete a rapid watershed assessment(s) in an 8-digit HUC watershed(s).

The Conservation Effects Assessment Project

The Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) began in 2003 as a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices used by private landowners participating in selected USDA conservation programs. Project findings and results will be used to report progress on the environmental effects of these programs, aid discussions on conservation policy development, guide conservation program implementation, and ultimately, help farmers and ranchers make informed conservation choices. CEAP will assess the benefits of conservation practices associated with the following USDA conservation programs in the 2002 Farm Bill: Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Security Program (CSP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance Program, and Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). Conservation practices that will be assessed include conservation buffers; erosion control; wetlands conservation and restoration; establishment of wildlife habitat; and management of grazing land, tillage, irrigation water, nutrients, and pests.

CEAP focuses on developing approaches, methodologies, and databases to produce scientifically credible estimates of environmental benefits of conservation. Eventually, CEAP will assess benefits to water quality, soil quality, water conservation and wildlife habitat on cropland, grazing land, and wetlands. Work is underway to develop suitable and affordable analytical approaches for these other land uses and natural resource concerns.

Key Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Agricultural Research Service, Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, Farm Service Agency, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA Economic Research Service, USDA Forest Service, USDA Office of Risk Assessment and Cost-Benefit Analysis, U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Soil and Water Conservation Society, The Nature Conservancy and The Wildlife Society.

Results and Accomplishments

NRCS CEAP produced a series of bibliographies and reports that explain recent scientific results covering environmental effects of conservation practices. This information is useful in designing both policies and on-the-land conservation systems that foster practical and environmentally sound conservation practices. More than \$2.5 million has been awarded to five land grant universities to develop research, education, and extension projects aimed at improving the quality of water resources in agricultural watersheds. This joint effort with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service responds to a need to conduct research that: 1) evaluates the impacts of interactions among conservation practices and their biophysical setting on water quality at the watershed scale; and 2) evaluates social and economic factors influencing implementation and maintenance of practices. CEAP also responds to a need to conduct outreach education to transfer knowledge from this research to farmers, ranchers, community leaders, and other stakeholders.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's National Plant Data Center

The National Plant Data Center (NPDC) acquires, develops, improves, and disseminates plant information to support NRCS and other efforts to improve the ecological health of the land. The PLANTS Database provides standardized information about the vascular plants, mosses, liverworts, hornworts, and lichens of the U.S. and its territories. It includes names, plant symbols, checklists, distributional data, species abstracts, characteristics, images, crop information, automated tools, onward Web links, and references. This information primarily promotes land conservation in the United States and its territories, but academic, educational, and general use is encouraged. PLANTS reduces government spending by minimizing duplication and making information exchange possible across agencies and disciplines.

Key Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Smithsonian Institution- National Museum of Natural History, US Army Corps of Engineers USDA, Agricultural Research Service, USDA, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA, Farm Services Agency, USDA, Forest Service, USDA, Rural Development, USDI, Bureau of Land Management, USDI, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wetland Inventory, USDI, Geological Survey, USDC, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), University of Nebraska-Omaha North Dakota State University, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale FNA/Missouri Botanical Garden and Biota of North America Program

Results and Accomplishments

PLANTS has added 8000 new names representing 4500 new accepted tax and 3500 new synonyms. Many of these are vascular plants of the U.S., and most of the rest are agriculturally important. The U.S. vascular flora has been completely revised with updated nomenclature, plant distribution, growth habit, duration, and nativity. PLANTS has county distribution data for 48 states.

NRCS: Cooperative Conservation Projects**Missouri River Ecosystem Protection**

Restoration and protection of important habitats found adjacent to the Missouri River including historic wetland habitats throughout the floodplain in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Innovation/Highlight

Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) and the commitment from a variety of partners early on produced a successful plan for maximum environmental benefit.

Resource Challenge

The Missouri River floodplain is home to a variety of species that were threatened due to loss of critical habitat. Many partners worked together to plan restoration and protection efforts of the important habitats found adjacent to the Missouri River along with the historic wetland habitats found across the floodplain. WREP is being used effectively to connect lands that are already protected providing a contiguous corridor benefit.

Key Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Four of Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts, Nebraska Environmental Trust and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Results and Accomplishments

Through a comprehensive partnership approach, WREP is providing many public benefits including wildlife habitat, flood prevention and water quality. WREP enrollment through easements and restorations provides habitat for sensitive species like the Interior

Least Tern, Piping Plover and Pallid Sturgeon. NRCS and partners established a Wetlands Assistance Team to focus on technical delivery.

Market based approach to Endangered Species Recovery

Innovative market based approach in Central Texas where landowners become eligible for wildlife assistance and earn recovery credits for the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler. The credits are then used to estimate the overall program contribution to species recovery when considering other projects subject to the Endangered Species Act.

Innovation/Highlight

Market Based Approach to improving and protecting endangered species habitat.

Resource Challenge

The project's goal is to protect and enhance grazing land and forest health technology that contributes to endangered species recovery.

Key Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Defense, Texas Department of Agriculture, Texas Watershed Management Foundation, Texas Wildlife Association, Environmental Defense and the Central Texas Cattlemen's Association.

Results and Accomplishments

Since being funded in the summer of 2006, landowners in five key Golden-Cheeked Warbler habitat counties have been notified that the species is on the endangered list. This project will be an extension of work done previously under the Leon River Restoration Project, where restoration work is providing the necessary tools to enhance habitat. These producers will receive specific management planning technical assistance that focuses on restoration practices that will maintain and enhance habitat through a recovery credit system.

Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program Easement

NRCS Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) easement protects 70 acres adjacent to Wilson's Creek National Battlefield-Greene County, Missouri from development. It forever restricts the land use to agricultural purposes.

Innovation/Highlight

The 70 acres have significant relevance to the Civil War, and keeping them agricultural will ensure that future generations can see the same open spaces of the battlefield that the soldiers did when they battled at Wilson's Creek. This was the first FRPP easement approved in Missouri because of historic significance.

Resource Challenge

Rising land values in the area near Springfield, Missouri, make selling agricultural land for development attractive. Keeping this land agricultural required the commitment and cooperation of several agencies, organizations and individuals to see this project through.

Key Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, DOI National Park Service, Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Foundation; Civil War Preservation Trust; Ozark Greenways, Inc.

Results and Accomplishments

This land was part of a key Civil War battle in Missouri. By ensuring that it will forever remain agricultural, the land is protected from development, which would have forever altered the view of the battlefield for people visiting the national park. It also preserves valuable green space in a rapidly expanding urban area, thus enhancing the Ozarks' natural heritage.